

Supporting women who face separation from their baby



History

Birth Companions began in 1996 after a woman from Holloway Prison was shackled during labour. Volunteer birth workers started supporting women giving birth from the Prison at the Whittington hospital.

We became a charity and developed more services for women in the prison: a pregnancy group, support for women separating from their baby, and a group for mums and babies.

We realised that women in the community faced similar challenges and began supporting marginalised women in the community in London during pregnancy, birth and early parenting.

Today

- We have paid staff and sessional workers, as well as volunteers
- In the community, we run targeted antenatal classes in Hackney, a mother and baby group in Islington and support women 1:1 at birth and in the perinatal period in London
- Referrals come from midwives, support workers and other professionals
- Holloway has closed but we support women and babies in Bronzefield and Peterborough Prisons
- We are starting to work in Foston Hall and Low Newton Prisons which hold pregnant women but do not have MBUs (see Fiona Dry's presentation)

How we work

- We have a non-judgemental and respectful approach and our support is unconditional
- Our staff and volunteers are highly trained and work in a trauma-informed way
- We aim to empower women and support them in their choices so that they can give their babies the best start possible, even in the most difficult of situations
- We tailor our support to the needs of each woman and are woman centred

Support for mothers separating

Soon after we started, we began supporting mothers who were separating from their babies after the birth.

Women spoke of their past trauma of having babies removed and how there had been no support for them.

We realised how important it was for mothers in this situation to feel listened to and supported and that this could actually help women to come to terms with what was happening.

What is helpful in pregnancy

- Women said they felt reassured to know they would not be alone for the birth
- With so much out of her control, doing a birth plan and thinking about her wishes could be empowering
- To bond or not to bond? We helped women to think about giving their baby a good start
- Some women did not want to talk about the separation or were in denial and we respected this
- Knowing what would happen and how long they would have with their baby

Some women choose to:

- Write a letter or poem to their baby
- Knit or make something for their baby to take with them
- Keep the baby blanket or clothes their baby first wore as a keepsake
- Write a letter to the foster carers about how their baby liked to be held and fed
- Read something to their baby before saying goodbye
- Keep photos, a lock of hair etc in a memory box

What we have observed with women who are separating

- Sometimes women are “holding on” and have more difficult and longer labours
- Trauma of previous removals can surface
- Women need additional emotional support
- There is often confusion amongst health professionals and prison officers about what is happening after the birth-this adds to the distress of mothers.

What women have found helpful at birth

- Emotional and physical support
- Someone there just for her
- Help to interact with baby after the birth
- Support with breastfeeding or expressing if this is her choice
- Having her wishes respected
- Photos
- Having someone to talk to later on (who was there) about her labour and her baby

Women in custody face additional challenges

- Weeks of anxiety waiting to hear about their MBU place
- 50% will get a MBU place in prison
- The local authority recommendation is crucial to getting a MBU place but communication and planning is even more difficult than in the community
- Some local authorities have misconceptions about prison MBUs
- Social workers have difficulty with booking visits to see women and getting info from prison
- No provision for Social Services assessment or support in prisons
- Some women go into labour before hearing about their MBU place
- The presence of officers at hospital and pressure to return women to the prison after the birth
- A lack of support once women are back in prison. They become “invisible”, no longer pregnant and not on the MBU

Women tell us

that having additional support

- preparing for birth
- while giving birth and
- after the birth

helped them to feel better about
what was happening

Tara

We supported Tara for the birth of her fourth baby, after having previous babies removed. She felt well supported during labour by her midwife and birth companion. However, Tara then spent 10 days in hospital while arrangements were made for a foster placement for her and her baby. Tara said she felt judged by some hospital staff and found the lack of privacy difficult when social workers visited.

Tara appreciated being able to talk with birth companions who visited daily –

“they were the only people who really listened to me when I talked about how I was feeling.”

Louise saying goodbye to her baby at hospital- by her birth companion

“ Louise fed D and then wrapped him in his yellow shawl. She had a big bag of things from the Prison for him-things she had made or collected. She sorted these all out and gave them to the social workers to give to the baby’s foster carers. Baby D was then laid in his cot by Louise. When she was ready, the social workers wheeled him out to the special care unit. He was to be taken to his new foster carers the following day.”

Barbara's story

“I have five beautiful children. Unfortunately none of my babies live with me. I was blessed and cursed to fall in love with a guy who was very violent and that led social services to intervene. I first met... (Birth Companions) when I was pregnant with R. Social services wanted to take R at birth, and I didn't want anyone around when I gave birth to her, I couldn't emotionally deal with people welcoming a baby they wouldn't see... My midwife was very supportive and persuaded me to meet with Birth Companions...the birth companion came to my house and spoke with me about what I wanted - the first time that I felt like anyone cared about me and remembered I was still a person... By the end of the meeting, I had written a birth plan and had a support package in place.

Support in birth

On the 16th I had contractions that were unbearable. I called the helpline and told them I was en route to the hospital. As I got to the hospital, a birth companion arrived.... she massaged my back and made me feel as comfortable as possible. I wanted a drug-free birth and she made sure I got that. As the contractions became stronger, I got weaker and started to cry, her comforting words and encouragement saw me get from two centimetres to four.....As soon as we got into the labour room I needed to push. As I climbed onto the bed R's head came out. There wasn't a dry eye in the room. My birth companion took some pictures of me and R and encouraged me to breastfeed her just like in my birth plan.

Postnatal support

Thank you from the bottom of my heart. My daughter's birth was everything I wanted it to be. The week in hospital with R was amazing. I had suffered with postnatal depression before and was scared it would happen to me again, but I can honestly say that having the constant love and support from these lovely ladies made my time with my daughter so effortless. Unfortunately all good things come to an end..... I had to go to court and it was decided that R would go to my mum. There are no words to describe how I felt... Birth Companions helped me immensely when I was at my lowest... Thank you. You will always have a place in my heart. You are my family."

**To refer women to us for support or to receive
a copy of our recent research
“Making Better Births work for women facing
multiple disadvantage”**

Please email us at

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For more info, see our website

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